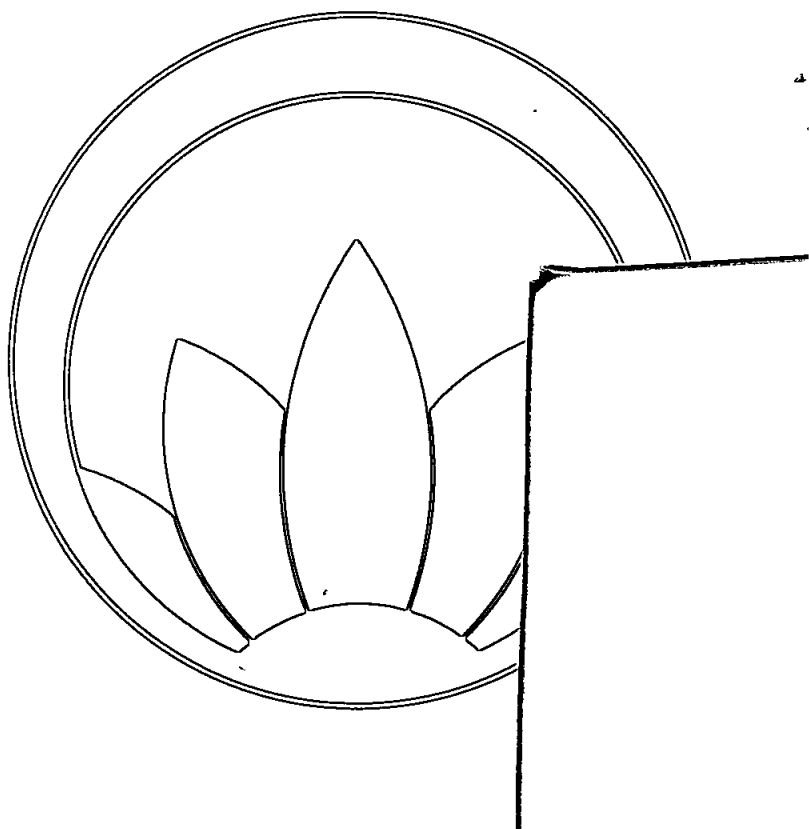
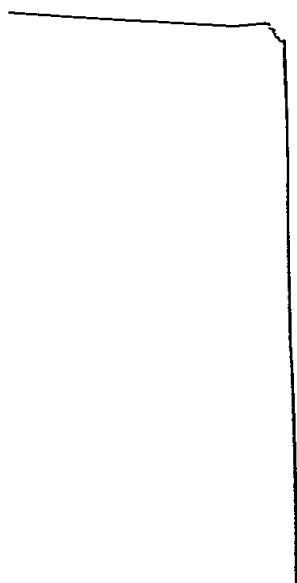


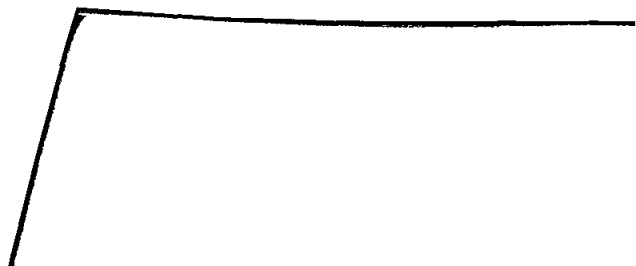
A HUMANIST FUNERAL SERVICE

by CORLISS LAMONT





A
Humanist
Funeral
Service





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 *Prometheus Books*
Buffalo and New York City

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Foreword

There has long been a widely felt need for a funeral service centering around a non-supernatural, Humanist philosophy of existence. The Humanist view, stemming from some of the greatest thinkers in history, rejects the idea of personal immortality and interprets death as the final end of the individual conscious personality. The philosophy or religion of Humanism sets up the happiness and progress of mankind on this earth as the supreme goal of human endeavor.

Whatever changes may take place in our dynamic twentieth-century society and whatever science may achieve in prolonging the average life-span, we can be certain that men will always have to confront the major crisis of death. The stark fact of mortality will continue to evoke in the human heart dominant moods such as sorrow, tragedy, love, hope, resignation and courage. And it seems probable that most people throughout the world will wish to maintain the tradition of some simple ceremony to express appreciation, grief and farewell when a friend or relative dies.

A funeral service is, moreover, helpful in overcoming any sense of unreality about the death of a loved one. It brings out the finality of the parting with him, the fact that past relationships with him have been severed and that a new relationship of memory alone must be established.

Rituals concerned with death are a form of art and should appeal to the aesthetic sense. In my opinion they ought to be dignified, brief and reminiscent of the deep social ties in experience; they ought to avoid sentimentality, showiness and somberness. But funeral services should not try to avoid stirring up the emotions. Psychological wisdom has clearly shown that the suppression of emotion in the face of death may have harmful consequences and that the normal expression of grief can serve as a healthy release and purge of tension.

With the inevitable misgivings of one who is exploring a subject that is both delicate and difficult, I am presenting a tentative version of a funeral service that may be considered appropriate by modern minds. Within the broad outlines of the Humanist world-view I have tried to stress three main points: man's kinship with Nature, the naturalness of death and the far-reaching social interrelations and ideals of human living.

Those who make use of this service will, of course, feel free to alter it as they see fit, especially in regard to the selections of music and poetry. For here individual preference is of the greatest importance and the dead person's own favorites may well be the determining factor. I have appended at the end of this little book a number of alternate choices for music and poetry. I have likewise left it to individual taste to decide whether to include in

the service biographical material and some sort of tribute to the deceased. I myself believe that in most cases a friend or member of the family should speak briefly about the life of the dead person and its significance.

This Humanist service appeared initially as an article in 1940 in *Unity*, a liberal religious magazine. It was first published in book form by The Beacon Press in 1947. In the light of criticisms made by ministers and other individuals, I have considerably revised and expanded this fourth edition. The service can function either as a regular funeral service prior to interment or cremation; or as a memorial service at some time subsequent to interment or cremation. For commitment to the earth or flames I have added special material.

As it stands at present, the service proper, not including possible biographical remarks, lasts a little more than twenty minutes, of which about half is taken up by the selections of music. The meditations and quoted passages of prose and poetry are to be read by the minister or whoever is in charge of the ceremony.

The quotation on page 16 is from Anne Parrish's novel *Golden Wedding*, Harper & Brothers, 1936, page 343.

New York City
January, 1977

C.L.

A
Humanist
Funeral
Service

Introductory Music

It is usually desirable to have fifteen or twenty minutes of introductory music while people are gathering for the funeral service at the house, apartment, hall or church. For the music an organ or piano is preferable. Instrumental or vocal accompaniment, if it can be arranged, naturally adds its own special quality. The playing of first-rate recordings can also be satisfactory. The following selections are suggested for the period prior to the service:

1. Handel's "Largo" from *Xerxes*
2. Gluck's "Dance of the Spirits" from *Orpheus*
3. Rubinstein's *Kamennoi Ostrov*
4. Bach's *Come Sweet Death*
5. Massenet's *Meditation* and *Elegie*

The Service

(There is to be a short pause between the introductory music and the service proper. The beginning of the service can be indicated by the person in charge taking his place.)

MUSIC. Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*, Second Movement, first third.

INTRODUCTION:

We are gathered here today to do honor to the life and memory of _____. Death has come to our friend, as it comes eventually to all human beings.

READING. *Philippians*, IV, 8:

"Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

MEDITATION:

The occurrence of death brings home to us the common concerns, the common crises and the common destiny of all who live upon this earth. Death draws us together in the deep-felt emotions of the heart; it dramatically accents the ultimate equality involved in our ultimate fate; it reminds us of the essential brotherhood of Man that lies beneath all the bitter dissensions and divisions registered in history and contemporary affairs. The human race, with its infinite roots reaching back over the boundless past and its infinite ramifications extending throughout the present world and ever pushing forward into the future, is one great family. The living and the dead and the generations yet unborn make up that enduring communion of

humanity which shares the adventure of life upon this dear and pleasant earth.

Here on our planet there have evolved, over millions of years, human beings possessed of the power of mind, the beauty of love, the splendor of heroism. Men and women, with all their diverse gifts, are fully part and product of the Nature that is their home. They are cousins to all other living forms; and in their very flesh and blood one with that same marvelous and multi-structured matter that underlies the whole mighty universe, the shining array of stars, the gracious sun, our own world and everything within it.

This great and eternal Nature it is in which we ever live and move and have our being. Thus, beyond our kinship with our fellow men, there is always our kinship with the natural world that sustains us with its varied goods and stirs us with its wonderful beauty. This dynamic Nature stamps its pattern of constant change on every existing thing. Change means transformation, beginnings, endings; birth, growth, death. So it is that the freshness and delight of each new day, the continual zest of living, are tempered by the sting of transiency.

Yet transiency and death itself are entirely natural and understandable in our universe. Life and death are different and essential aspects of the same creative process. It is Nature's law that living organisms should eventually retire from the scene and so make way for newborn generations. In this sense life affirms itself *through* death. Each one of us

"must die for the sake of life, for the flow of the stream too great to be dammed in any pool, for the growth of the seed too strong to stay in one shape. . . . Because these bodies must perish we are greater than we know." In the larger view, then, in the total picture, death as such is not an evil and is not to be feared by reasoning men.

We recognize these truths. And we accept as inevitable the eventual extinction of human individuals and the return of their bodies, indestructible in their ultimate elements, to the Nature that brought them forth. In death as in life we belong to Nature.

MUSIC. Grieg's "Morning" from *The Peer Gynt Suite*.

MEDITATION:

Although it is premature death that is most tragic, the final parting signified by death is bound to bring shock and sorrow whenever the ties of love and friendship are involved. Those who feel deeply will grieve deeply. No philosophy or religion ever taught can prevent this wholly natural reaction of the human heart.

Whatever relationships and enterprises death breaks in upon, we can be sure that those whom we have lost are finally and eternally at peace. And whatever length of time we have had a friend, we always remain grateful for his having lived and for

our having known him in the full richness of his personality.

Nothing now can detract from the joy and beauty that we shared with _____; nothing can possibly affect the happiness and depth of experience that he himself knew. What has been, has been—forever. The past, with all its meaning, is sacred and secure. Our love for him and his love for us, his family and friends, cannot be altered by time or circumstance.

We rejoice that _____ was and is a part of our lives. [We rejoice that he lives on in his beloved children and grandchildren.] His influence endures in the unending consequences flowing from his character and deeds; it endures in our own acts and thoughts. We shall remember him as a living, vital presence. That memory will bring refreshment to our hearts and strengthen us in times of trouble. These are reflections that we treasure; for there can never be too much friendship in the world, too much human warmth, too much love.

READING (May be read in unison by all present).
I *Corinthians*. XIII, 1-8, 13:

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed

the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing.

"Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

"Love never faileth; but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. . . . And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

BRIEF PERSONAL REMARKS or TRIBUTE. (Optional.)

MEDITATION:

On this occasion, as we reflect upon human existence and its meaning, it is for us, the living, to dedicate ourselves anew to those great ethical aims and ideals that have long been part of our cultural heritage; to reaffirm that friendliness and sympathy toward our fellow men which now as always remain the foundation-stone of the good society; to resolve anew to bend our minds and energies toward the pursuit of truth, the creation of beauty and the advancement of freedom. Beyond the welfare of our

native land, we look to the world at large and seek the happiness and progress of all humanity upon this fruitful earth—to the end that everywhere men may have life and have it more abundantly.

May the human race ever flourish, ever grow in grace and wisdom and generosity. May generation after generation through eternities of time come to know the sweetness of living and rejoice in the inexhaustible beauties of this universe of Nature.

For the best of all answers to death is the wholehearted and continuing affirmation of life on behalf of the greater glory of humankind.

READING. From *The Passing Strange* by John Masefield:

For all things change, the darkness changes,
The wandering spirits change their ranges,
The corn is gathered to the granges.

The corn is sown again, it grows;
The stars burn out, the darkness goes;
The rhythms change, they do not close.

They change, and we, who pass like foam,
Like dust blown through the streets of Rome,
Change ever, too; we have no home,

Only a beauty, only a power,
Sad in the fruit, bright in the flower,
Endlessly erring for its hour,

But gathering, as we stray, a sense
Of Life, so lovely and intense,
It lingers when we wander hence,

That those who follow feel behind
Their backs, when all before is blind,
Our joy, a rampart to the mind.

MUSIC. Brahms' *First Symphony*, Fourth Movement, first third.

ANNOUNCEMENT: The service is concluded. Interment (or commitment) will be private.

MUSIC. (Optional. About five minutes of additional music may be played while the people are leaving.)

Burial Service

(This service is designed to take place at the grave, after the coffin has been lowered. Two forms of service are here suggested, the second being for a person comparatively young at the time of his death.)

I

In committing the body of _____ to this hallowed ground, we do so with deep reverence for

that body as the temple, during life, of a unique and beloved personality. And we think of the words of Socrates, "that no evil can befall a good man either in life or after death."

Here under the wide and open sky our friend will rest in peace. We dedicate this simple plot, amid these natural surroundings, to every beautiful and precious memory associated with him.

We lay his body in that gentle earth which has been the chief support of Man since first he walked beneath the sun. To all human beings, to all living forms, the soil has ever provided the sustenance that is the staff of life. To that good earth we now give back the body of our friend and say with the poet Shelley:

He is made one with Nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;
He is a presence to be felt and known
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone. . . .
He is a portion of the loveliness
Which once he made more lovely.

II

In saying our last farewell to _____, we shall read a sonnet by George Santayana, who once wrote: "The length of things is vanity; only their height is joy."

READING. From Santayana's *To W. P.*:

With you a part of me hath passed away;
For in the peopled forest of my mind
A tree made leafless by this wintry wind
Shall never don again its green array.
Chapel and fireside, country road and bay,
Have something of their friendliness resigned;
Another, if I would, I could not find,
And I am grown much older in a day.
But yet I treasure in my memory
Your gift of charity, and young heart's ease,
And the dear honor of your amity;
For these once mine, my life is rich with these.
And I scarce know which part may greater be,—
What I keep of you, or you rob from me.

ALTERNATIVE READING. From *A Pindaric Ode* by
Ben Jonson:

It is not growing like a tree
In bulk, doth make men better be;
Or standing long an oak, three hundred year,
To fall a log at last, dry, bald, and sear:
A lily of a day
Is fairer far in May,
Although it fall and die that night;
It was the plant and flower of light.
In small proportions we just beauties see;
And in short measures, life may perfect be.

In committing the body of _____ to this hallowed ground, we do so with deep reverence for that body as the temple, during life, of a unique and beloved personality. Here under the wide and open sky our friend will rest in peace. And we dedicate this simple plot, amid these natural surroundings, to every beautiful and precious memory associated with him.

We lay his body in that gentle earth which has been the chief support of Man since he walked beneath the sun. To all human beings, to all living forms, the soil has ever provided the sustenance that is the staff of life. To the good earth and to the great Nature that are the source of human existence, we now give back the body of our friend, with the full and certain knowledge that, in the words of Socrates, "no evil can befall a good man either in life or after death."

Cremation Service

(This service is designed to take place in the anteroom or chapel of the crematorium, just before the cremation itself. Two forms of service are here suggested, the second being for a person comparatively young at the time of his death.)

I

In committing the body of _____ to the flames, we do so with deep reverence for that body

as the temple, during life, of a unique and beloved personality. Through the purifying process of fire this body now becomes transformed into the more simple and ultimate elements of our universe. Fire is itself one of the great forces of Nature.

READING. From *Fruit-Gathering*
by Sir Rabindranath Tagore:

O Fire, my brother, I sing victory to you.

You are the bright red image of fearful freedom.

You swing your arms in the sky, you sweep your impetuous fingers across the harp-string, your dance music is beautiful. . . .

My body will be one with you, my heart will be caught in the whirls of your frenzy, and the burning heat that was my life will flash up and mingle itself in your flame.

To this same flame, then, we give finally the body of our friend, with the full and certain knowledge that, in the words of Socrates, "no evil can befall a good man either in life or after death."

II

In saying our last farewell to _____, we shall read a sonnet by George Santayana, who once wrote: "The length of things is vanity, only their height is joy."

READING. From Santayana's *To W. P.*:

With you a part of me hath passed away;
For in the peopled forest of my mind
A tree made leafless by this wintry wind
Shall never don again its green array.
Chapel and fireside, country road and bay,
Have something of their friendliness resigned;
Another, if I would, I could not find,
And I am grown much older in a day.
But yet I treasure in my memory
Your gift of charity, and young heart's ease,
And the dear honor of your amity;
For these once mine, my life is rich with these.
And I scarce know which part may greater be,—
What I keep of you, or you rob from me.

ALTERNATIVE READING. From *A Pindaric Ode* by
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To fall a log at last, dry, bald, and sear:
A lily of a day
Is fairer far in May,
Although it fall and die that night;
It was the plant and flower of light.
In small proportions we just beauties see;
And in short measures, life may perfect be.

In committing the body of _____ to the flames, we do so with deep reverence for that body as the temple, during life, of a unique and beloved personality. Through the purifying process of fire this body now becomes transformed into the more simple and ultimate elements of our universe. Fire is itself one of the great forces of Nature. In the heavens above it shines out with majestic splendor in the warming and life-giving sun and in all the infinite host of stars; upon our earth it is the versatile servant of mankind and one of the bases of civilization.

To this same fire, then, we give finally the body of our friend, with the full and certain knowledge that, in the words of Socrates, "no evil can befall a good man either in life or after death."

Service for Interment of Ashes

(If the ashes are interred in a burial plot, the family may wish to have a further brief ceremony such as the following.)

In placing the ashes of _____ in this hallowed ground, we think again of all that our dear companion and friend meant and means to us. And we dedicate this simple plot, amid these natural surroundings, to every beautiful and precious memory associated with him.

We lay these ashes in that gentle earth which has

been the chief support of Man since first he walked beneath the sun. To all human beings, to all living forms, the soil has ever provided the sustenance that is the staff of life. To that good earth we now commit the ashes of our friend and say with the poet Shelley:

He is made one with Nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;
He is a presence to be felt and known
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone. . . .
He is a portion of the loveliness
Which once he made more lovely.

Additional Suggestions for Music

In selecting and suggesting music for *A Humanist Funeral Service*, I have tried to choose pieces that are dignified and serene, though not necessarily ones composed with the theme of death in mind. I include some well-known examples of professional funeral music, though a good deal of such music seems to me too dramatic, powerful or solemn for the type of service I have written.

There are also included a few selections of Nature music, since the music that comes in toward the middle of the service is meant to suggest the beauty and splendor of Nature, Man's sole and sufficient home.

Most of the pieces mentioned are available in scores for both piano and organ. It is comparatively easy for a trained musician to transcribe piano into organ music where that may be necessary. In presenting the following additional selections for music, I do not, of course, pretend to have exhausted the possibilities:

Anonymous (Old Irish) *Londonderry Air*
Bach "Sonatina" from *Cantata 106*
Beethoven *Third Symphony (Eroica)*, Second Movement
Brahms *A German Requiem*, first fourth
Chopin *Marche Funèbre*
Debussy *Clair de Lune*
Delius *Over the Hills and Far Away*, opening part
Dvorak *Fifth Symphony (from The New World)*, Second Movement, first third
Gounod *Ave Maria*
Grieg *The Last Spring*
Handel "Dead March" from *Saul*
Kern "Wandering Westward" from *Mark Twain*
Kreisler *Liebesleid*
MacDowell "To a Wild Rose" from *Woodland Sketches*
Mozart *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*
Nevin *The Rosary*
Ravel *Pavane for a Dead Princess*
Schubert *Death and the Maiden*, Second Movement
Wagner "Liebestod" from *Tristan and Isolde*

Additional Suggestions for Poetry

Death has always been one of the great themes for poets of every age and country. And there are a vast number of poems about death that embody a Humanist viewpoint. For inclusion here I have chosen various outstanding poems that give expression to some aspect of the Humanist philosophy and that are appropriate for reading aloud at a Humanist funeral service.

And If He Die?

And if he die? He for an hour has been
Alive, aware of what it is, to be.
The high majestic hills, the shining sea,
He has looked upon, and meadows golden-green.
The stars in all their glory he has seen.
Love he has felt. This poor dust that is he
Has stirred with pulse of inward liberty,
And touched the extremes of hope, and all between.
Can the small pain of death-beds, can the sting
Of parting from the accustomed haunts of earth,
Make him forget the bounty of his birth
And cancel out his grateful wondering
That he has known exultance and the worth
Of being himself a song the dark powers sing?

Arthur Davison Ficke

In Memoriam

They are not dead, our sons who fell in glory,
Who gave their lives for Freedom and for Truth;
We shall grow old, but never their great story,
Never their gallant youth.

In a perpetual springtime set apart,
Their memory forever green shall grow,
In some bright secret meadow of the heart
Where never falls the snow.

Joseph Auslander

The Dead

I

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!
There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,
But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.
These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhopéd serene,
That men call age; and those who would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
Honor has come back, as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.

II

These hearts were woven of human joys and cares,
Washed marvelously with sorrow, swift to mirth.
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,
And sunset, and the colors of the earth.
These had seen movement, and heard music; known
Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended;
Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone;
Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is ended.

There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
And lit by the rich skies, all day. And after,
Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
A width, a shining peace, under the night.

Rupert Brooke

Requiem

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie:
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

Robert Louis Stevenson

From *Thanatopsis*

To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder and grow sick at heart;—
Go forth, under the open sky, and list
To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—
Comes a still voice. . . .

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan which moves
To that mysterious realm where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustain'd and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

William Cullen Bryant

Sonnet CVII

Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come,
Can yet the lease of my true love control,
Supposed as forfeit to a confined doom.
The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,
And the sad augurs mock their own presage;
Incertainties now crown themselves assured,
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.
Now with the drops of this most balmy time
My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes,
Since, spite of him, I'll live in this poor rhyme,
While he insults o'er dull and speechless tribes:
And thou in this shalt find thy monument,
When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent.

William Shakespeare

From Adonais

XL

He has outsoared the shadow of our night;
Envy and calumny and hate and pain,
And that unrest which men miscall delight,
Can touch him not and torture not again;
From the contagion of the world's slow stain
He is secure, and now can never mourn
A heart grown cold, a head grown gray in vain;
Nor, when the spirit's self has ceased to burn,
With sparkless ashes load an unlamented urn.

XLII

He is made one with Nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;
He is a presence to be felt and known
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,
Spreading itself where'er that Power may move
Which has withdrawn his being to its own;
Which wields the world with never-wearied love,
Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above.

XLIII

He is a portion of the loveliness
Which once he made more lovely: he doth bear
His part, while the one Spirit's plastic stress
Sweeps through the dull dense world, compelling there,
All new successions to the forms they wear;
Torturing th' unwilling dross that checks its flight
To its own likeness, as each mass may bear;
And bursting in its beauty and its might
From trees and beasts and men into the Heaven's light.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

On His Seventy-Fifth Birthday

I strove with none, for none was worth my strife.
Nature I loved and, next to Nature, Art:
I warmed both hands before the fire of life;
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

Walter Savage Landor

From On the Nature of Things, Book III

No single thing abides; but all things flow.
Fragment to fragment clings—the things thus grow
 Until we know and name them. By degrees
They melt, and are no more the things we know.

Globed from the atoms falling slow or swift
I see the suns, I see the systems lift
 Their forms; and even the systems and the suns
Shall go back slowly to the eternal drift.

Thou too, oh earth—thine empires, lands, and seas—
Least, with thy stars, of all the galaxies,
 Globed from the drift like these, like these thou too
Shalt go. Thou art going, hour by hour, like these.

Nothing abides. Thy seas in delicate haze
Go off; those moonéd sands forsake their place;
 And where they are, shall other seas in turn
Mow with their scythes of whiteness other bays. . . .

The seeds that once were we take flight and fly,
Winnowed to earth, or whirled along the sky,
 Not lost but disunited. Life lives on.
It is the lives, the lives, the lives, that die.

They go beyond recapture and recall,
Lost in the all-indissoluble All:—
 Gone like the rainbow from the fountain's foam,
Gone like the spindrift shuddering down the squall.

Flakes of the water, on the waters cease!
Soul of the body, melt and sleep like these.

Atoms to Atoms—weariness to rest—
Ashes to ashes—hopes and fears to peace!

O Science, lift aloud thy voice that stills
The pulse of fear, and through the conscience thrills—
Thrills through the conscience with the news of
peace—

How beautiful thy feet are on the hills!

Lucretius

(Translated by W. H. Mallock)

Sonnet

And you as well must die, beloved dust,
And all your beauty stand you in no stead;
This flawless, vital hand, this perfect head,
This body of flame and steel, before the gust
Of Death, or under his autumnal frost,
Shall be as any leaf, be no less dead
Than the first leaf that fell,—this wonder fled,
Altered, estranged, disintegrated, lost.
Nor shall my love avail you in your hour.
In spite of all my love, you will arise
Upon that day and wander down the air
Obscurely as the unattended flower,
It mattering not how beautiful you were,
Or how beloved above all else that dies.

Edna St. Vincent Millay

From Prometheus Unbound

Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance,
These are the seals of that most firm assurance
Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;
And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,
Mother of many acts and hours, should free
The serpent that would clasp her with his length;
These are the spells by which to reassume
An empire o'er the disentangled doom.

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

From To Toussaint L'Ouverture

Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind.

William Wordsworth

From *The Garden of Proserpine*

We are not sure of sorrow,
And joy was never sure;
Today will die tomorrow,
Time stoops to no man's lure;
And love, grown faint and fretful,
With lips but half regretful
Sighs, and with eyes forgetful
Weeps that no loves endure.

From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives for ever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Then star nor sun shall waken,
Nor any change of light:
Nor sound of waters shaken,
Nor any sound or sight:
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,
Nor days nor things diurnal;
Only the sleep eternal
In an eternal night.

Algernon Charles Swinburne

From When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd

Come, lovely and soothing Death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later, delicate death.

Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious;
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding Death.

Dark Mother, always gliding near, with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee—I glorify thee above all;
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come,
come unfalteringly.

Approach, strong Deliveress!
When it is so—when thou hast taken them, I joyously
sing the dead,
Lost in the loving, floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss, O Death.

From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose, saluting thee—adornments
and feastings for thee;
And the sights of the open landscape, and the high-spread
sky, are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.

The night in silence, under many a star;
The ocean shore, and the husky whispering wave, whose
 voice I know;
And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veil'd Death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.

Over the tree-tops I float thee a song!
Over the rising and sinking waves—over the myriad
 fields, and the prairies wide;
Over the dense-pack'd cities all, and the teeming
 wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee, O Death!

Walt Whitman

Parta Quies

Goodnight; ensured release,
Imperishable peace,
 Have these for yours,
While sea abides, and land,
And earth's foundations stand,
 And heaven endures.

When earth's foundations flee,
Nor sky nor land nor sea
 At all is found,
Content you, let them burn:
It is not your concern;
 Sleep on, sleep sound.

A. E. Housman

Margaritae Sorori

A late lark twitters from the quiet skies:
And from the west,
Where the sun, his day's work ended,
Lingers as in content,
There falls on the old, gray city
An influence luminous and serene,
A shining peace.

The smoke ascends
In a rosy-and-golden haze. The spires
Shine and are changed. In the valley
Shadows rise. The lark sings on. The sun,
Closing his benediction,
Sinks, and the darkening air
Thrills with a sense of the triumphing night—
Night with her train of stars
And her great gift of sleep.

So be my passing!
My task accomplish'd and the long day done,
My wages taken, and in my heart
Some late lark singing,
Let me be gather'd to the quiet west,
The sundown splendid and serene,
Death.

William Ernest Henley

A Loftier Race

These things shall be,—a loftier race
Than e'er the world hath known shall rise
With flame of freedom in their souls,
And light of knowledge in their eyes.

They shall be gentle, brave, and strong
To spill no drop of blood, but dare
All that may plant man's lordship firm
On earth, and fire, and sea, and air.

They shall be simple in their homes,
And splendid in their public ways,
Filling the mansions of the state
With music and with hymns of praise.
Nation with nation, land with land,
Unarmed shall live as comrades free;
In every heart and brain shall throb
The pulse of one fraternity.

New arts shall bloom of loftier mould,
And mightier music thrill the skies,
And every life shall be a song
When all the earth is paradise.

John Addington Symonds

The Choir Invisible

Oh may I join the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence: live
In pulses stirred to generosity,
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
For miserable aims that end with self,
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,
And with their mild persistence urge man's search
To vaster issues.

So to live is heaven:
To make undying music in the world,
Breathing as beauteous order that controls
With growing sway the growing life of man.
So we inherit that sweet purity
For which we struggled, failed, and agonized
With widening retrospect that bred despair.
Rebellious flesh that would not be subdued,
A vicious parent shaming still its child,
Poor anxious penitence, is quick dissolved;
Its discords, quenched by meeting harmonies,
Die in the large and charitable air.
And all our rarer, better, truer self,
That sobbed religiously in yearning song,
That watched to ease the burden of the world,
Laboriously tracing what must be,
And what may yet be better—saw within
A worthier image for the sanctuary,
And shaped it forth before the multitude,
Divinely human, raising worship so

From *Samson Agonistes*

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.
Let us go find the body where it lies
Sok'd in his enemies blood, and from the stream
With lavers pure and cleansing herbs wash off
The clotted gore. I with what speed the while
(Gaza is not in plight to say us nay)
Will send for all my kindred, all my friends
To fetch him hence and solemnly attend
With silent obsequie and funeral train
Home to his Fathers house: there will I build him
A Monument, and plant it round with shade
Of Laurel ever green, and branching Palm,
With all his Trophies hung, and Acts enroll'd
In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song.
Thither shall all the valiant youth resort,
And from his memory inflame their breasts
To matchless valour, and adventures high:
The Virgins also shall on feastful days
Visit his Tomb with flowers, only bewailing
His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice,
From whence captivity and loss of eyes.
All is best, though we oft doubt,
What th' unsearchable dispose
Of highest wisdom brings about,
And ever best found in the close.
Oft he seems to hide his face,

But unexpectedly returns
And to his faithful champion hath in place
Bore witness gloriously; whence Gaza mourns
And all that band them to resist
His uncontrollable intent,
His servants he with new acquist
Of true experience from this great event
With peace and consolation hath dismiss,
And calm of mind all passion spent.

John Milton

Sonnet

Like treasure lost at sea, her loveliness
Lies buried now: unchanged, inviolate,
Beyond all sounding, glassy depths possess
That beauty; naught has perished small or great.
Far from this surface world of weeks and days,
The coming summer or the winter's cold,
Ineffably her own, a thousand ways
Rest in the dark of understanding, hold
Color and light against that other death
Oblivion. Sunk in silence they await
The moving tide of memory at whose breath
Waters divide above our doomed estate;
Her look, her laugh, her step upon the stair,
Leaping to life, incomparably fair.

Elizabeth Morrow

From *Heritage*

What fills the heart of man
Is not that his life must fade,
But that out of his dark there can
A light like a rose be made,
That seeing a snow-flake fall
His heart is lifted up,
That hearing a meadow-lark call
For a moment he will stop
To rejoice in the musical air
To delight in the fertile earth
And the flourishing everywhere
Of spring and spring's rebirth.
And never a woman or man
Walked through their quickening hours
But found for some brief span
An interval of flowers,
Where love for a man or woman
So captured the heart's beat
That they and all things human
Danced on rapturous feet.
And though, for each man, love dies,
And the rose has flowered in vain,
The rose to his children's eyes
Will flower again, again,
Will flower again out of shadow
To make the brief heart sing,
And the meadow-lark from the meadow
Will call again in spring.

Theodore Spencer

Dear Lovely Death

Dear lovely Death
That taketh all things under wing—
Never to kill—
Only to change
Into some other thing
This suffering flesh,
To make it either more or less,
But not again the same—
Dear lovely Death,
Change is thy other name.

Langston Hughes

Epitaph

O Youth, O Beauty, ye who fed the flame
That here was quenched, breathe not your lover's name.
He lies not here. Where'er ye dwell anew
He loves again, he dies again, in you.
Pluck the wild rose, and weave the laurel crown
To deck your glory, not his false renown.

George Santayana



A Humanist Funeral Service offers an alternative ceremony for those who do not wish to use traditional religious forms. It provides meditations and eloquent passages of prose and poetry to express appreciation, grief, and farewell when a friend or loved one dies. One may choose, according to individual preference, the text and music he feels to be most appropriate.

The service is dignified and reminiscent of past relationships with the deceased, stressing love, the beauty of life, man's kinship with nature, and the naturalness of death.

In the quest for solace at a time of grief, one can turn to this nontheistic service for security, comfort, and purpose in accepting the finality of the loss of a loved one.

" . . . the best of all answers to death is the wholehearted and continuing affirmation of life on behalf of the greater glory of humankind."

—CORLISS LAMONT

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